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Reviews

Books for review and reviews should be sent to the review editor, Dr Aude Le Borgne, at Celtic and Scottish Studies, University of Edinburgh, 27 George Square, Edinburgh EH8 9LD, Scotland, UK. Enquiries may be made by email to audelb7@hotmail.com. Reviews may be submitted by email or on disc (preferably formatted for Word for Windows, PC) or as clear unmarked typescript suitable for scanning. All relevant books received will be listed and as many as possible will be reviewed.

COSMOS

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Editor: Emily Lyle
Review Editor: Aude Le Borgne

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The Neo-Pagan Ritual Year

JENNY BUTLER

This paper examines the structure of the Neo-Pagan ritual year and the activities that take place in celebration of the progression of the seasonal cycle. This analysis draws from ethnographic research into the beliefs and ritual practices of contemporary individuals and groups who follow the Neo-Pagan spiritual traditions of Wicca, Witchcraft and Druidry. The term Pagan is used to denote nature-based spiritual traditions. The prefix "neo-" is used in reference to contemporary followers of nature-based spirituality and to distinguish between present-day Paganism and ancient pre-Christian Paganism. The ritual year holds considerable importance for Neo-Pagans and my paper addresses both the significance of the festivals in Neo-Pagan worldview and some of the ritual practices associated with each festival. The methodology employed in researching the Neo-Pagan ritual year was attendance at seasonal celebrations as a participant observer and discussion of the topic of the annual festivals with informants during tape-recorded interviews. Due to the diversity of the Neo-Pagan community, it is difficult to make generalisations about the beliefs and practices of Neo-Pagans so my research deals only with the beliefs and practices of groups and individuals that I have encountered in the field.

STRUCTURE OF THE RITUAL YEAR

The structure of the Neo-Pagan ritual year is based on the solar cycle and seasonal transition and certain calendar dates are special times for various Neo-Pagan groups. Neo-Pagans celebrate eight annual festivals or "sabbats", as some Neo-Pagans have termed them. The annual cycle or "Wheel of the Year" passes through eight festivals: Samhain, Winter Solstice, Imbolc, Spring Equinox, Bealtaine, Summer Solstice, Lughnasadh and Autumn Equinox (see Figs. 1 and 2). The Neo-Pagan calendar year can be divided into four major fire festivals and the Equinoxes and Solstices. The fire festivals each mark the time when the season begins to change into the next:

Samhain on October 31st, Imbolc on February 1st, Bealtaine on May 1st and Lughnasadh on August 1st. Then there is the Spring Equinox on March 21st and Autumn Equinox on September 21st and the Winter Solstice on December 21st and Summer Solstice on June 21st. Some Neo-Pagans use the Irish-language names for the festivals but the names are most often found in anglicised form in Neo-Pagan literature.

The wheel of the year is presented as a circle that rotates and "turns" so that it passes through each festival once annually. The image of the sacred circle and cycles are prominent in Neo-Pagan culture – other examples are the cycle of birth-death-rebirth, the notion of the Goddess passing through the cycle of maiden-mother-crone and the solar and lunar cycles. There is also the mythological cycle of the Holly King overcoming the Oak King at midwinter and the Oak King being overcome by the Holly King at midsummer. The Holly King is the winter king representing darkness and the Oak King is the summer king representing light (Rabinovitch and Lewis 2002: 132).

Some Neo-Pagans distinguish between the Celtic quarter days and the other festival days, calling them the "Greater Sabbats", and calling the solstices and equinoxes together the "Lesser Sabbats" (Lewis 1999: 249). Some individuals and groups hold specific festivals to be of particular importance, whereas others celebrate each of the eight festivals in a similar way.

As we know, the changing seasons were of huge importance for early humans. As the weather changed, so did the availability of certain foods. Older societies who were dependent on agriculture for their survival had a strong awareness of the seasons and lived close to the land. People in our society today generally don't experience such a close relationship with the land they live on or with nature – our food, including that which is out of season, can be bought in a supermarket and we do not have to worry about freezing to death or starving as the wintertime approaches. However there are modern Pagans who choose to follow the natural progression of the year and mark each seasonal change. For many, this is a way of living closer to nature and of connecting with the natural world and its rhythms.

The Neo-Pagan celebration of the ritual year begins at Samhain. In Neo-Pagan cosmology, based on what is known of ancient Celtic cosmology, the New Year begins at Samhain when nature enters into

its "dark half". It is thought that all of the Celtic festivals began on the eve of the specific day of celebration (Wood 1998: 98) since the Celts measured their days from their dusks (Jestice 2000: 50). Many Neo-Pagans, in keeping with this belief, begin their celebrations on the eve before the festival date. Beverly J. Stoeltje says of festivals

For all their diversity [...] festivals display certain characteristic features. They occur at calendrically regulated intervals and are public in nature, participatory in ethos, complex in structure, and multiple in voice, scene and purpose. Festivals are collective phenomena and serve purposes rooted in group life. (1992: 261)

The festivals that form the Neo-Pagan ritual year can be seen to exhibit all the features that Stoeltje mentions. They occur at calendrically regulated intervals. Despite the fact that the exact calendar dates for the solstices and equinoxes can vary by a day either way due to astronomical reasons, the Neo-Pagan celebrations generally take place on the same fixed dates of 21st March for the spring equinox and the 21st of September for the autumn equinox. They are public in nature and participatory and also "multiple in voice, scene and purpose" since the seasonal celebrations often take place at well-known sacred sites where various groups and individuals will be in attendance, each with their own unique views and ways of practising ritual. Neo-Pagan festivals serve a purpose rooted in the collective life of the Neo-Pagan community since they mark the times when the seasons change. This recognition and celebration of annual changes in nature is of great significance to people who follow a nature-based religion and who consider their spiritual connection to the land to be of the utmost importance. In his study of New Age and Neo-Pagan personal narratives relating individual experiences of spirituality, self and belonging, Jon P. Bloch makes the point that: "however loosely structured these clusters of individuals are, and however diverse the beliefs from one individual to the next, they consider themselves to be a 'community'" (Bloch 1998: 2). In the Irish context, I have found that Irish Neo-Pagans often use the term "community" in a self-referential way. Although the exact practices and beliefs may vary across individual practitioners, there are collective meanings, common concerns and understandings that establish a shared sense of

identity. The festivals are the recurrent sequence of dates for community gatherings and sacred sites are usually the centres of celebratory activity.

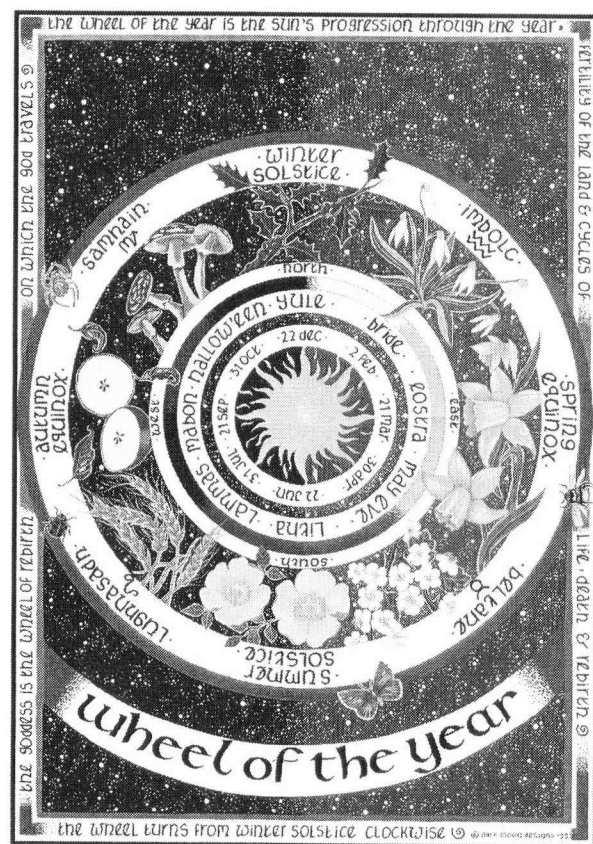


Figure 1. "Wheel of the Year". Painting by Jane Brideson, copyright 2002 Dark Moon Designs©



Figure 2. The "Wheel of the Dagda" in the Temple of Isis belonging to the Fellowship of Isis Organisation in Clonegal Castle, Wexford, Ireland. The photograph shows a carved wooden circle enclosing a sun shape with a spiral of gold paint at its centre. Ivy leaves are wound around the circle. The wheel rests against the main altar in the temple, which holds a statue of the Goddess Isis. (Photograph taken by the author on 27/07/02.)

CELEBRATION OF THE FESTIVALS

The eight festivals pertain to both celebration and spiritual reflection and are what one informant described as "spiritual parties". Beginning with the festival of Samhain on October 31st, I will follow

the cycle and illustrate with examples from fieldwork what occurs at each time and what significance these activities have in Neo-Pagan worldview. It is important to note that the way in which the festivals are celebrated is variable and that the activities of individuals and groups are quite diverse since there is no uniform or standardised way of celebrating these festivals. Space does not allow for detailed description of rituals or the total activities surrounding any one festival, so what I present here is the general idea of what I have encountered at festival celebrations, with some illustrations of observances associated with each festival.

The Neo-Pagan celebration of the ritual year begins at Samhain, as this is the time that marks the New Year for the majority of Neo-Pagans. The word Samhain has been interpreted as "End of Summer" (*samh*, summer, *fuin*, end), marking the death of the old year and the birth of the next year (Jestice 2000: 312). Leila Dudley Edwards, in her examination of Halloween and contemporary Paganism, looked at how tradition and folklore were consciously employed to enhance or intensify ritual (Dudley Edwards 2000: 235). In the Irish context, I have found that many groups draw on vernacular tradition to add to the significance of their celebrations, including that of Samhain. In vernacular Irish tradition, it was believed that on the night of Samhain, the barrier between the human world and the Otherworld became thin. This was the time of the Celtic feast of the dead and, in later folk tradition, it was believed that deceased relatives could return on this night to the place where they had once lived (Danaher 1972: 207). In Neo-Paganism, this is a time of veneration of the dead and many Neo-Pagans will invite the spirits of the deceased or the ancestors into the sacred circle. An example of this is a Samhain ritual I took part in. On October 31st 2002, I joined an earth-based spirituality group in Cork to celebrate Samhain. We gathered around a large bonfire in a field. We all took off our shoes and socks so that our feet could be in direct contact with the earth and everyone stepped into the sacred space that had been marked on the ground around the bonfire. We then stood in a circle holding hands and called¹ the quarters by walking around *deiseal*² (clockwise) and calling on the spirits of each quarter (certain magical beings are associated with each compass direction of the circle). Each person then called on a dead ancestor to join us in the circle. A chalice filled with mead and loaves of home-baked bread were passed around the

circle and shared. Another example is the ritual of a Wiccan Coven in Dublin who write messages to dead relatives and loved ones and throw these into the ritual fire at Samhain as a way of sending a message to the spirit world and in remembrance of the deceased.

Because the "veil between worlds" is believed to be thin, this time is considered conducive to receiving occult knowledge through divination. Many groups practise divination at this time. Some groups invoke "Dark Goddesses" at Samhain and at other times during the dark half of the year. An example of what one Neo-Pagan group considers a "Dark Goddess" is Scáthach, a mythic female warrior who appears in Irish literature as Cú Chulainn's martial arts teacher (MacKillop 2004: 378) and whose name may be translated as "shadow" (Cotterell 1999: 82).

Bonfires are an integral part of most Neo-Pagan festivities attached to the ritual year. The figurative "return" of the sun in the northern hemisphere is celebrated by the lighting of bonfires at the winter solstice. Some consider this a symbolic "rebirth" of the sun, since, after the shortest day of the year, the light appears to break through the wintertime blackness. One Druid group included in my research diverge from the general Neo-Pagan belief that the new year begins at Samhain since this is when the Celtic celebration of the new year was thought to have taken place, and instead celebrates the beginning of the new year on the winter solstice. As part of their celebration of Winter Solstice 2003, the group lit a giant candle (a half-barrel tub completely filled with wax with six wicks going through it). The candle was left to burn while a party commenced and smaller candles and a bonfire were also lit to mirror the "returning" sun. Instead of a Christmas tree, this group decorates a tree with magical symbols and places a pentacle on top.

Bonfires and the symbol of fire have a strong association with the Neo-Pagan celebration of the festival of Imbolc on February 1st also. Both the Pagan fire Goddess Brigit (or Bride) and the Christian Saint Brigit are venerated at this time. The word Imbolc comes from an older Irish word *Oimelc* meaning "Sheep's Milk" (Wood 1998: 98), as this is the time when lambs are born and ewes lactate. In Neo-Paganism it is a time to celebrate freshness and new beginnings. Some Neo-Pagans visit sites associated with Brigit on this day, such as Brigit's Well in Kildare and Brigit's Well at Uisneach. Some Neo-Pagans make St Brigit's crosses and these can be used as festival

decorations. One informant creates a cradle with a doll in it for her Imbolc celebration, which she calls Bríd's Bed:

Imbolc is also known as Bríd's Day and [she is a] Goddess of the land of this country. So basically on that day there's an effigy made of Bríd, usually out of straw or grain [...] that's cut the previous year. And she's wrapped in a kind of white cloth and laid in a basket surrounded by flowers or just [...] kind of arranged nicely. And candles are left burning there all night. And it's basically about welcoming the Goddess back, ah, and, you know, a bit of encouragement and that (*laughs*).

Maria usually makes this effigy of Bríd out of straw that had been kept from the previous Lughnasagh, but sometimes uses other materials that are at hand:

This year for instance I didn't use the grain at all. Somebody sent me, um, this little [...] I think she was like, supposed to go on the top of a Christmas tree or something, but I mean it was a really nice little doll and really kind of natural. And she had kind of red hair and so I used that instead.

The important thing for Maria is to have something to represent Bríd so that the image can be used as a focus during the celebration:

This year we just had the fire lighting in the living room and we put the Bríd's Bed out in front of the fire and we had the candles and we just, basically just had a little chat, you know, and kind of just talked about the fact that, you know, it's the darkest time of winter. [...] There's a reflection as well, not just what's happening in nature but what's happening inside you as a person. And so it's kind of the time when you do feel kind of, you know, you don't feel like going out and you don't feel like doing anything. But you know it's a kind of promise that you're going to come back, you are going to start doing things again. (Interview with Maria 02/05/2002)

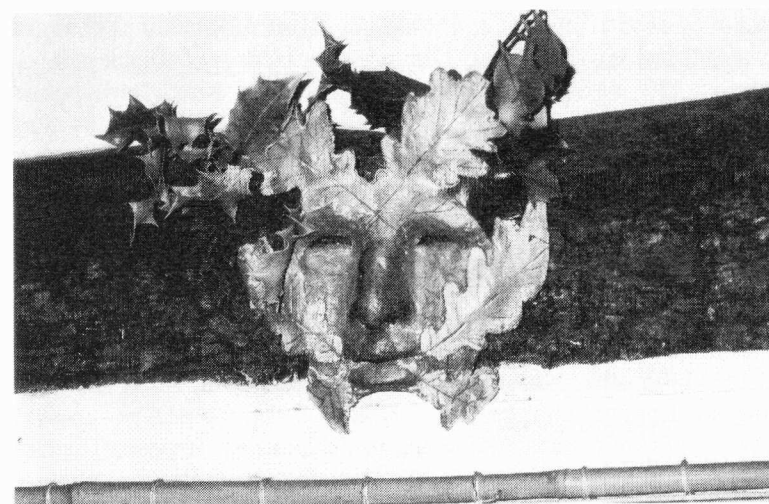


Figure 3. A Green Man wall plaque hung on a wooden beam in a cottage. The plaque was originally a mask created by a Neo-Pagan group for ritual use. (Photograph taken by the author on 21/12/03.)

The image of the vegetation God, the Green Man, represented as a foliate male head (see Figure 3), may also be seen at Neo-Pagan celebrations at this time. The Green Man symbolises irrepressible life (Anderson and Hicks 1990: 14) and the regeneration of plant-life after the bleak winter. His appearance in Neo-Pagan rites is in celebration of the renewal of vegetation and recognition of the new spring growth.

At Imbolc 2002, I joined in the celebrations of an Earth-based spirituality group in County Leitrim. I accompanied the group to the Shannon Pot, a place that the group visits every year at Imbolc. This is a deep pool of the River Shannon with underground springs that cause the surface of the water to bubble, giving the pool the appearance of a cauldron. The group considers this place and the Shannon River in its entirety to be sacred because of its association with the Goddess Sinann (MacKillop 2004: 387). At the Shannon Pot, each person took a turn of going to the water's edge and filling a chalice with water. The individual then drank some water and poured the remainder of the water in the chalice back into the pool while saying a blessing (see Figure 4). Later that day, the same group did another ritual, which took place at a stone circle on their land. A ritual

drama was enacted where a woman acted out the seasonal change. In the beginning of the ritual, she was dressed in a black shawl, to symbolise the darkness of winter. She stood stock still behind a leafless tree with her head bowed and her eyes closed to symbolise the bleakness of winter when there is little activity in nature. She stood in the Northern quadrant of the circle and in terms of magical correlations the North is the element of Earth and the place of darkness (Shallcrass 2000: 31). During the ritual she emerged from behind the tree and moved quickly and shed the black shawl to reveal a bright green dress that she was wearing underneath. This represented the stirrings of the new plants and the emergent spring growth. Many other Neo-Pagan groups have similar ritual dramas that reflect the seasonal changes.

At the spring (vernal) equinox, night and day are equal in length, so darkness is balanced with light. Consequently this is considered to be a time of balance and a time to be introspective and examine how equilibrium can be achieved in one's personal life. Many groups have a "path-working" (Neo-Pagan term for a guided meditation) on the theme of balance or light and dark at this time. The rationale behind much of this path-working is that each person is given space to reflect on the qualities of the particular time of year and also to consider personal growth and change as the Wheel of the Year turns. A Druidic group, the Owl Grove, does a meditation as part of the Spring Equinox ritual. For example, during one ritual, each member sat on a stone of the stone circle and meditated on a plant. The *Ard Draoi*³ provided each person with a sprig of a different plant such as woodbine and elder from the garden. Each person was asked to contemplate the nature of the plant that he or she had been given. After meditating on the plants, the group discussed the new growth that occurs in nature in spring. The theme of the discussion was the way in which each distinctive plant grows in relation to its environment.

Plants are influenced by environmental conditions and they are dependent on different elements – the water in their roots, the wind that moves their leaves and makes them sway, their roots embedded in earth. The growth of the plant was then paralleled with the growth of a human being. This discussion was intended to show how a process of growth is also at work in the spiritual lives of human beings and how the magical elements affect personal growth and

change. Much of the Owl Grove training deals with the magical elements – Earth, Air, Fire and Water – and how each individual can hone their spiritual growth in respect of the different magical elements. The Autumn Equinox is correspondingly a time of equilibrium and is mostly celebrated in a similar way.

May Day marks the beginning of summer. In vernacular Irish tradition, this is a time when the veil between worlds was again thin (as at Samhain) and, in traditional lore, the time to watch out for fairies and protect butter and livestock from supernatural interference. Kevin Danaher, discussing traditional folk observances surrounding the festival days, states (1982: 218):

The unseen world was particularly active on May Eve. The Good People of the hills were at their revels and humans had to be careful not to disturb or offend them; by watchfulness, ceremony, prayer and charm, all care was taken to safeguard against their machinations... .

Rather than using charms and other protections against the fairies, Neo-Pagans instead invite communication with the fairies. In fact, the *Sidhe* (the fairy people) are often invoked during ritual, and one Druid group, the Owl Grove mentioned above, invoke the *Sidhe* during every one of their rituals. When calling the quarters, the individual at each quarter draws a circle in the air with his or her index finger. The circle that is visualised is meant as a symbolic portal for the *Sidhe* and other spirits to pass through, so that they can enter the circle with ease from other planes of existence. The *Sidhe* are then called upon and invited to enter the circle and take part in the ritual and contribute their energies to the working or to watch over and protect the sacred circle. In Neo-Pagan worldview, the *Sidhe* seem to be generally conceptualised as benevolent inhabitants of the spirit realm and the *genii loci* of the Irish landscape.

The old Irish word for the May festival is "Beltaine". The etymology of this word is obscure (Maier 1997: 35) but it has been thought to mean "Great Fire" (Wood 1998: 98). Celticists have also suggested that the name could have some association with the northern European deity Belenus (see Hutton 1996: 218). At Neo-Pagan gatherings, the bonfire is of central importance and people usually sit around it to tell stories, play music, drum, and to chant and sing songs. The hill of Uisneach in Co. Westmeath is associated with

the Beltaine festival and some Irish Neo-Pagans visit the hill on May Day, although the hill is visited on other festivals too. Whatever the origins of the name and whatever the ancient rites practiced at Beltaine, the Neo-Pagan festivities often include the lighting of fires and invoking of the "Old Gods".

The hill of Uisneach in Co. Westmeath is associated with the Bealtaine festival and some Irish Neo-Pagans visit the hill on May Day, although the hill is visited on other festivals too. The festival is associated with bonfires, "the fires of bel". The origins of the name "bel" are uncertain and different sources attribute different meanings to the festival name – some suggest it means "lucky fire" and certain medieval Irish manuscripts contain a reference to sacred fires at Bealtaine and the name of the festival has been interpreted as deriving from the God Bil, Bial or in some cases Bel, which may be a reference to Baal, a God of the Old Testament; Celticists have also suggested that the name could have some association with the northern European deity Belenus (see Hutton 1996: 218). Whatever the origins of the name and whatever the ancient rites practised at Bealtaine, the Neo-Pagan festivities often include the lighting of fires and the invoking of the "Old Gods".

At the summer solstice, the sun has reached its zenith, its highest point in the sky, making this the longest day of the year. Hereafter, the days will be shorter as sunlight recedes. In Neo-Pagan celebrations of this, Sun Gods are invoked and bright, solar imagery used and bonfires lit to mirror the blaze and light of the sun. A public ritual was carried out on the Hill of Tara for the Tara Summer Solstice Festival in 2003 and much bright clothing and jewellery were worn by the ritual participants; flaming torches were also carried in a procession up to the top of the mound.⁴

August 1st is the celebration of the first harvest (corn harvest), named after the Celtic Sun God Lugh. The symbolic death of the Corn King may be acted out in the form of a play. Folk customs are often incorporated into Neo-Pagan festivities and many have been assimilated and are now part of annual Neo-Pagan celebrations. For example, a Witch named Carmel makes Corn Dollies, a traditional craft of England and Ireland. In some cases the corn dolly may be an actual doll made out of straw, perhaps in imitation of the traditional harvest "corn maiden" or "dressed calliagh", which is a dressed-up figure made of the last sheaf of corn cut (Danaher 1972: 199).

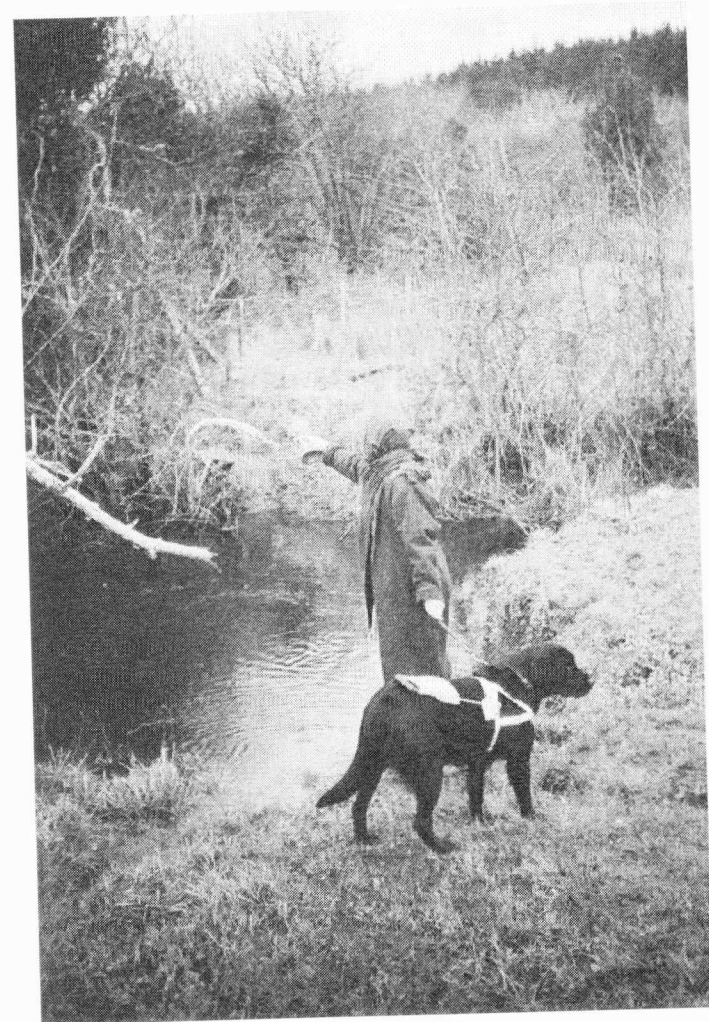


Figure 4. A member of the Grove of Shinann Earth-based spirituality group stands by the edge of the Shannon Pot and pours some water from a chalice into the pool in honour of the Goddess Sinann. The Shannon Pot is a deep pool located a few miles north of the village of Dowra, Co. Cavan where the Shannon rises. (Photograph taken by the author on 02/02/02.)

Carmel once experienced a vision in which the Goddess appeared to her and handed her a sheaf of corn. She interpreted this to mean that she should do something with corn as part of her spiritual life. She researched the magical associations, myths and legends to do with corn and learned how to make corn dollies. In Carmel's opinion, the beliefs and traditions surrounding corn are part of ancient Paganism and the creation of items out of corn in the present time, with the knowledge of the magical associations of the materials being used, can be seen as a Pagan craft. In Carmel's view of her craft, we can see some degree of reinterpretation of the Irish traditions of corn-dolly making. In her worldview, these crafts belong to ancient Paganism and she feels, as a contemporary Pagan, that she is carrying out a task set by the Goddess and in some small way reviving these ancient traditions. The following story, for instance, shows how she reclaims what is, in her opinion, an old Pagan sacred site:

Crom Dubh was the old corn king in Ireland and on Croagh Patrick that's who Saint Patrick was actually fighting. So he was trying to suppress the old Pagan God, which was Crom Dubh. And so on the Garland Sunday, Peter and I actually climbed Croagh Patrick, shortly after I broke my ankle (*laughs*). And I made a very special corn dolly and I put it in Patrick's Bed⁵ – I hope it has good dreams (*chuckles*) – and rededicated the mountain to Crom Dubh. And, well it's a small way of reclaiming our history but I felt that that was important because all these people were climbing this holy mountain and not realising that it was a Pagan holy mountain *long* before it was ever a Christian one.

Croagh Patrick, a 762 metre high mountain in County Mayo, is known as the "holiest mountain in Ireland" (Dames 1996: 169). It has strong associations with pre-Christian religion and the God Crom Dubh is one symbolic representation of ancient Paganism. In present-day Ireland, thousands of people climb barefoot up Croagh Patrick as part of Christian pilgrimage. However, this mountain has been considered a sacred site by different groups of people since pre-Christian times. The assembly at this mountain is a survival of the ancient Lughnasa festival, which was celebrated in Ireland by assemblies on hilltops (De Paor 1985: 40). Carmel's views of the

craft of corn-dolly making, and her explanations of the use she puts these items she makes to, are very much part of Neo-Pagan worldview. Part of her celebration of the festival was to reclaim what she considers a Pagan sacred site that has long been associated with the festival of Lughnasadh.

The Owl Grove invokes Lugh, the God to whom this festival is dedicated, during their Lughnasadh ritual. Following the ritual, the group usually visit a site that they consider to be sacred. After their Lughnasadh ritual in 2002, the group went to visit Lugh's well in Co. Offaly, both because of the association that the holy well's name has, for them, with the God Lug⁶ and also because they feel good energies at this place. After the ritual, the group share a meal with some bread from the "Lughnasadh loaf". The group collectively made the bread prior to the ritual and each person took a turn of mixing and kneading the bread. Consuming the bread reflected a sharing of something that had been communally created. Traditionally bread would have been made from the newly cut corn and many Neo-Pagan groups make a meal with seasonal food. The archaeologist Brian Hayden defines the feast as "any sharing between two or more people of special foods (i.e., foods not generally served at daily meals) in a meal for a special purpose or occasion" (Hayden 2001: 28). Many Neo-Pagan groups partake of a feast after a ritual, usually the festival rituals, this being oftentimes a meal of seasonal foods accompanied by cider or mead, an alcoholic drink of fermented honey and water. Mead is also used as a ritual libation during ritual within the sacred circle. In Celtic mythology, mead is associated with immortality and is said to be the drink of the Gods in the Otherworld (Chevalier and Gheerbrant 1996: 644). Feasts are an important group activity and food is often shared during ritual also. Another reason to have a feast following a ritual is that it is believed to "ground" the participants and help to bring them back to the mundane world after they have been in contact with spiritual or magical energies raised in ritual.

In many cultures of ancient times, the harvest was a time of sacrifice, often blood sacrifice, to the Gods (Frazer 1993: 425-38). The ancient harvest rituals of Ireland were not recorded so one can only speculate as to what took place. In fact, there are no known existing detailed written accounts of human sacrifice in the Irish context. It can only be noted that, in Ireland, there was at least a

surviving idea of harvest sacrifice that continued in folk tradition as the symbolic killing of the Corn Spirit believed to reside in the last sheaf cut (Danaher 1972: 199). Mediterranean commentators on the ways of the Celts inform us that Druids were known to carry out sacrifices. Classical writers recorded that the Druids would stab or cut the throats of their victims and then examine the blood and entrails of the dead for divinatory purposes and another method of sacrifice was to burn the victim alive in huge wicker images of men (Green 1997: 183). These classical accounts of Druid practices allude to human sacrifice in areas of the Celtic world, but none relate directly to Irish Druids. Sacrifices are scarcely ever mentioned in medieval Irish literature (Maier 1997: 241) and it would be extremely difficult to know with certainty whether sacrificial practices took place in ancient Ireland.

Despite the fact that the wicker men of antiquity were not directly associated with Druids in Ireland, some Neo-Pagans make a connection between Paganism and wicker men and incorporate this into their own practices. Neo-Pagans sometimes have a symbolic sacrifice, as actual blood sacrifice is not acceptable in modern Pagan worldview. The classical accounts describe both humans and animals being burned alive inside wicker men in a ritual to mollify the Gods.⁷ Adapting this idea of harvest sacrifice to modern circumstances, Neo-Pagans sometimes create an effigy to represent the Corn King or spirit of the harvest, which is then burned to imitate the death of the harvest God, who is then symbolically re-born from Mother Earth at the Winter Solstice. One informant describes the creation of a wicker man at Lughnasadh:

What we do tend to do sometimes is we build a wicker man at that time of year. And we set him on fire. We send the fire back up to the sun. You know it's very symbolic.

She goes on to describe a Wicker Man she saw at another Lughnasadh celebration she attended:

I've seen everything from a forty foot high one down to one who's only five foot tall. [...] The best one I ever saw – they made an image of a man made of sticks and wood, covered him in straw so he looked a bit like a scarecrow and they stuffed all

the first fruits of the harvest into it. There was apples and pears and everything else and he was just bulging with fruit and vegetables. So he looked like a cross between a straw man and a sort of vegetable man. And then they just set him on fire and you could hear all the fruit popping and all the nuts and things inside him popping away like mad. And everyone sort of danced around him and honoured him as the sort of divine sacrifice of the year. In other words, the first ripe fruits of the harvest – we give them back to the earth. (Interview with Alice 09/01/01)

Neo-Pagans in Ireland and elsewhere create wicker men, maintaining what they perceive as an old tradition but omitting the blood sacrifice!

Another custom in recognition of the harvest is to build a Harvest Queen:

We actually make a giant Harvest Queen every year in the field. Peter spends a day making her. She's like a Harvest Maiden. She's like six or seven foot tall. And we completely deck her in corn dollies and flowers from the garden. And we kind of like to say "thank you" to her every year. (Interview with Carmel 09/12/03)

The ancient tradition of building wicker men cannot be correlated with the practices of ancient Irish Druids and, judging by classical accounts, it was not a specific harvest ritual. Despite this, some Neo-Pagans link up disparate stands of historical practices and allusions to ancient Druidic practice and reinterpret these in the creation of a modern harvest-time ritual. The building of modern-day wicker men and Harvest Queens is very much part of Neo-Pagan worldview and a way of expressing their understanding of the significance of harvest-time.

OTHER RITUAL GATHERINGS

For Pagans, other activities, such as gardening, are also bound up with the ritual year and with the seasonal cycle. The moon's phases

are believed to have influence over magical workings. One Pagan Witch only plants seeds when the moon is waxing and does the weeding and rids the garden of dead leaves and unwanted growth only when the moon is waning.

Some groups, Wiccan Gardnerian Covens⁸ and groups of Witches in particular, may also meet on the night of each full moon (once a month) during the year (thirteen times a year in all) – these gatherings are referred to as Esbats. Much of the terminology and ideas about the eight festivals is derived from the work of the archaeologist Margaret Murray on the witch trials, which connected James Frazer's theory of an old rural fertility religion with contemporary folk customs of her time. Her books gained credence at the time but her methodology was later questioned and her work has been found to be inaccurate and selective (Hutton 2000: 12). Her writings have been largely discredited in academia but, as James Lewis points out, whether or not Margaret Murray's scholarship is correct, her terminology has been adopted by Neo-Pagan Witches (Lewis 1999: 92-3) and so it can be seen that, notwithstanding the fact that Murray's theory has by and large been criticised and found problematic in the academic world, it still holds sway in Neo-Pagan discourse. I have found that Irish individuals and groups of various Neo-Pagan traditions use similar terminology when discussing the ritual year. Druids, Witches and Wiccans alike frequently use the term "Sabbat" while the term "Esbat" is mostly used only by Witches and Wiccans.

CREATIVE REINTERPRETATIONS

The notion that these eight annual festivals were observed and celebrated in a certain way by ancient peoples forms part of what has been called the "foundation myth" (Lewis 1999: 300) of modern Paganism. This foundation myth forms the basis for beliefs about a pre-Christian Pagan religion with associated beliefs and practices that some try to parallel to the beliefs and practices of Pagans today. However this kind of matching up of presumed ancient Irish festival practices with contemporary Irish Neo-Pagan festival celebration is tenuous as relatively little historical evidence exists on the religious beliefs and practices of pre-Christian Druids in Ireland or of the

beliefs and practices of the early Irish generally. The celebration of the changing seasons in Irish folk tradition includes many customs believed by scholars to be ancient in origin but this is not to say that all aspects of traditional celebrations can be traced back to ancient times; many festival customs originated in pre-modern times or medieval times. Some Neo-Pagans feel that they are celebrating the changing seasons in a similar way to the ancient pre-Christian Pagans but nobody can determine with accuracy whether or not the practices of contemporary Pagans is comparable to that of ancient Pagans. Neo-Pagan festival celebrations amalgamate various customs and observances to create a novel form of annual festivities and this is illustrative of the dynamic nature of contemporary Pagan culture.

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Notes

- 1 To "call the quarters" is a Neo-pagan phrase that refers to the invocation or "calling on" the spirits or "elementals" associated with each cardinal direction. Each cardinal point also corresponds to the four magical elements, usually the element of Earth in the North, Air in the East, Fire in the South and Water in the West. Some practitioners call the quarters by verbal means with an incantation for each cardinal direction whereas other practitioners may acknowledge the elementals by non-verbal means.
- 2 *Deiseal*: Irish-language word for clockwise. *Deiseal* has the meaning of turning to the right but also has connotations of "positive", "exact", "pleasant". The word *Deosil* (sun wise) is part of Neo-pagan terminology and is most likely an anglicised form of the Irish word. *Tuathal* is the Irish-language word for anti-clockwise.

- 3 This particular Druidic group use the Irish-language term for Druid, *Draoi*. The role of the *Ard Draoi* or High Druid is to oversee the group rituals.
- 4 The first Summer Solstice Festival of Tara took place in 2003. The festival activities began at sunrise and ended at sunset on Saturday 21st June and included storytelling, poetry readings, harp playing and traditional Irish music and Neo-Pagan performances of Dowsing by a Druid, drumming, circle dancing and various rituals. The night concluded with a Neo-Pagan "Ceremony of Fire" atop the Hill of Tara. Photographs of this fire ceremony can be viewed at: <http://irishdruids.org/tara-festival.html>
- 5 To be found on Croagh Patrick Mountain is a cairn called a "bed", associated with the Goddess and with older fertility practices (Dames 1996: 167). There is also a monument lower down on the mountain known as Leacht Mionnáin (MacNeill 1962: 80). Some have interpreted the name Leacht Mionnáin or "Leacht Mo-Bhionnainn" as "the "boy of Patrick" or the newborn infant Patrick and the cairn at the summit is also known by the name of "St. Patrick's Bed" (Dames 1996: 167-8).
- 6 It should be noted that it is not known whether the site in question has any pre-Christian associations and it is more likely that the holy well was named for some other personage and is unrelated to the Celtic God Lugh. The God Lugh (or Lug) may originally have been a God of the sun or of light and he also appears as a champion of the Tuatha Dé Danann in the 11th century text, *Cath Maige Tuired* (MacKillop 2004: 309).
- 7 See Julius Caesar, *De Bello Gallico*, VI, 13-18, quoted in Matthews 1996: 16, and Strabo, *Works*, XV, 9, 4-8, quoted in Matthews 1996: 18.
- 8 Wicca is a Pagan mystery religion (Crowley 1989: 262). Gerald Brosseau Gardner (1884-1964) founded Wicca and this "Gardnerian Witchcraft" began as a new religion in England in the late 1930s (Lewis 1999: xix). Wicca first emerged publicly in the late 1940s and the movement spread with the repeal of the Witchcraft Act in 1951 (Jordan 1996: 179). Gardnerians base their religion on the techniques taught by Gardner. Although there are many Wiccan paths, it is generally accepted that there are five principal ones: Gardnerian Wicca, Alexandrian Wicca (named for the practitioner Alex Sanders), Hereditary Craft, Traditional Craft and Feminist (or Dianic) Wicca

(Partridge 2004: 295) and there are also eclectic Wiccans who merge various beliefs and ritual techniques in devising their own personal magical practices.

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